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Towards a Posthumanist Institutional Ethnography: Viscous Matterings and Gendered Bodies

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Abstract

This article makes the case for Posthumanist Institutional Ethnography (PIE). In doing so, it builds on and diverges from Dorothy E. Smith's post-structural work on Institutional Ethnography (IE), and speaks into recent discussions on the contested nature of ethnography. Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Jane Bennet, and on empirical data from two recent projects, the article argues that PIE, in contesting human exceptionalism, places the human in relation to other-than-human objects, bodies and materialities, and thereby radically recasts ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Six features of PIE are identified. These features are put to work via an analysis of material moments which illuminate how gendered inequalities are produced, enacted and materialised in complex institutional ecologies. The article's theoretical and methodological contributions provide new insights into the fluid, ephemeral and affective materialisation of gendered politics in institutions.

Keywords: posthumanist institutional ethnography; matter, space, bodies, gender

Introduction

This article brings Institutional Ethnography (IE) (Smith 1974) into contact with posthumanist modes of inquiry. There are two reasons for doing this. The first is theoretical and indicates how the ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions of a Posthumanist Institutional Ethnography (PIE) helps reshape IE as a broader, more inclusive venture able to account for how other-than-human objects, bodies and forces influence the (re-)production of gendered institutional inequalities. The second is methodological and illuminates how PIE helps us better notice and attend to ephemeral, happenstance events which often escape notice and, in doing so, helps produce keener insights into the production of unequal institutional gendering practices in institutions. This theoretical-methodological work engages with ongoing debates about the nature and purpose of ethnography specifically (Hammersley 2018) and sociological inquiry more broadly (Fox and Alldred 2017). This is important, given that there are as yet, few indications that posthumanism has touched the field of ethnography, despite being increasingly taken up across other fields (see Weatherall 2012; Youdell 2017; Taylor and Ivinson 2013; Fairchild 2019a). Posthumanist approaches offer significant new insights which: extend traditional conceptions about what matters in research; recast how empirical inquiry is conducted; and reconceptualise the ethics and politics of research by including nonhuman-relations. In focusing on the entanglement of human-nonhuman objects, bodies, spaces and materialities in institutional life, PIE suggests ways of moving beyond ethnographic anthropocentrism and helps produce new insights into the micro-practices and material relations which condition how gender comes to matter in institutional practices.

Gender is central to our development of Posthuman Institutional Ethnography in offering a

novel lens for analysing how women's and girls' bodies are regulated in powerful ways in institutions and how normative gendering practices and gendered roles are both (re-)produced and might be challenged. While it is the case that all non-normative bodies (Black, disabled, ageing and LGBTQI+) are subject to institutional conditions and regulation in differing ways, our lens helps pick up on the specificities of how power operates in the doing of gender via the everyday material practices of institutional arrangements. It is worth noting that, in the field of higher education, studies of gender have largely focused on academics' and students' experiences to the almost entire neglect of non-academic staff, amongst whom cleaning staff are the most invisibilised. PIE helps address this by broadening out higher education studies to include analysis of cleaners' institutional contributions. In addition, studies in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have largely focused on the feminisation of the workforce and the absences therefrom of male 'role models'. PIE helps address this too by considering how ECEC as a field overwhelmingly relies on unchallenged assumptions about women's 'nature' which connect care and mothering, without interrogating the basis of the binary categorisation of nature/culture itself.

Data from two empirical studies are deployed to illuminate the insights PIE can produce into how gendering processes work as viscous matterings of human-nonhuman materialities, affects and forces. The phrase 'viscous matterings' takes up Nancy Tuana's (2008) conceptual metaphor of viscous porosity which, in its acknowledgement of matters' agency, provides an ontological challenge to the traditional separation of nature from culture. Viscous porosity underpins our conceptualisation of gendering practices as modes of 'sticky materiality' in institutional intra-actions and how they operate through relational, dynamic processes which are 'always interactive and [in which] agency is diffusely enacted in complex networks of relations' (Tuana 2008, 188-89). Seeing bodies as sites of viscous

matterings is important in shifting beyond binary notions of women's bodies as 'contaminated' and Other(ed) and in developing understandings of bodies' material vibrancy.

The article begins with an outline of IE as developed by Dorothy E. Smith (1974, 1992) followed by a brief map of the contested terrain of ethnography. These two sections provide a theoretical springboard for the ensuing theoretical elaboration of PIE. Following this, there is an account of the empirical materials. The remainder of the article identifies PIE's six key features and, through a focus on a series of 'material moments' (Taylor 2013, 2018a), puts the empirical materials to work to illuminate PIE's utility in understanding gender-in-the-making in institutions. The article ends with a brief encapsulation of the theoretical and methodological generativity of PIE.

Institutional ethnography

Dorothy E. Smith's pioneering work offered a feminist means to challenge the then-dominant sociological frameworks which tended to exclude women's perspectives. Smith (1974) critiqued sociological knowledge-making practices as a 'bifurcating' mode which split knowledge, experience and action in two, one pertaining to 'the body and the place in which it is' and the other to that which 'passes beyond it'. Smith argued that the bifurcation of the concrete, local and particular from the conceptual and abstract both expressed, took place through, and reinscribed established social positions of gendered relations which served to 'create conditions which facilitate [male] occupation of the conceptual mode of consciousness' (Smith 1974, 10). Furthermore, women, she asserted, 'mediate for men the relation between the conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms in which it is and must be realised, and the actual material conditions upon which it depends' (10). Smith's

powerful point – that the conceptual realm where male-stream sociological knowledge-making practices took place was considered to be the realm ‘beyond’ the body (9) – resonates with the work of other feminist pioneers, such as Donna Haraway (1988) and Sandra Harding (1993), and provides ammunition for offering an alternative feminist vision of sociological knowledge-production, one which, in Smith’s (1974, 11) words, ‘changes the relation of the sociologist to the object of her knowledge and changes also her problematic’. Smith’s feminist recasting requires ‘first placing the sociologist where she is actually situated ... and second, making her direct experience of the everyday world the primary ground of her knowledge’ (11). This led Smith to propose that IE, in taking account of, including and being written from women’s perspectives must: (a) be based in embodied actualities; (b) be situated, located and reflexive; and (c) recognise that knowledge is socially constructed and, as such, imbricated with social values. Smith’s feminist IE refocuses ethnography as an attention to ‘rediscovering the society from within’ (11) and reshapes sociological inquiry by ensuring that our own part in any such inquiry must be accepted and acknowledged.

Smith (1992) elaborated IE through a focus on the ‘relations of ruling’ and developed a post-structuralist account of how gendered experiences are mediated by discursive practices and discursively embedded in texts. Smith argued that texts are institutional artefacts which are easily replicable, circulating widely in organizations, and discursively produce and effect ongoing gendered power relations. Texts ‘enter into ... local practices ... and co-ordinate people’s activities’ (Smith 2001, 160). In other words, institutional texts are an effective feminist means of analysing micro and macro power relations in that they enable paths of action and the procedures of control they effect to be analysed. Texts render the hiddenness and pervasiveness of power more apparent and, thereby, more open to question. They offer an appropriate theoretical-empirical approach for gaining rich and specific insight into how

text-mediated relations of ruling operate within institutions, and the work they do in constructing, regulating and reproducing gendered bodies.

As a ‘new’, feminist-oriented model of social inquiry capable of producing close-up accounts of how gender gets done in the work of institutions (Campbell and Gregor 2008) IE has done necessary and important work. However, it has a number of limitations. The first is that its abiding focus on the *discursive* nature of relations of ruling is insufficient: IE remains caught within a post-structuralist interpretive mode which, as Karen Barad (2007) notes grants language too much power. This limitation is amply demonstrated by Smith’s own focus on the discursive life of texts in institutions. Second, IE is limited by its anthropocentric frame of reference: it fails to notice the work done by nonhuman and other-than-human bodies and objects in the gendering practices of mattering in institutional life. PIE seeks to address these oversights. We enter that discussion via a consideration of the contested definition, aims and purpose of ethnography.

Ethnography: A contested endeavour

Ethnography has generally emphasised the ‘importance of studying *at first hand* what people do and say in particular contexts’ (Hammersley 2006, 4). What struck us in this definition is that, while ‘at first hand’ is emphasised via italics in the original as denoting a particularity of the ethnographer’s approach, the word ‘people’ passes without comment. Hammersley notes that ethnography entails a range of approaches within loosely defined theoretical and methodological boundaries and contends that, while postmodernism blurs the boundaries between humans and machines, and the internet and virtual reality are reshaping what ethnographers might study, the ethnographer’s objects and subjects of study remain ‘people’s

perspectives' (4), along with their documents and artefacts. This point is reiterated in an article published twelve years later in which Hammersley (2018, 2) laments the proliferation of 'labelled varieties' of ethnography, notes the 'discrepant philosophical and methodological ideas' they reflect, and records a range of 'difficult and contentious issues' raised whether one pursues a 'thick' (focus on theoretical and value commitments) or 'thin' (focus on methods) definition of ethnography.

Despite these proliferations, the focus of ethnography remains the same: 'the significance of the meanings people give to objects, including themselves, in the course of their activities' (Hammersley 2018, 4) and its purpose remains 'understanding people's behaviour for its own sake, rather than in order to serve some practical goal' (7). Hammersley (2018) also considers the need for evaluative criteria to decide what counts as ethnography. Important for our argument is his suggestion that the criteria should not be framed in relation to 'existential commitments' or truth but in relation 'how consistently they can be applied, and how productive they are in generating worthwhile and reliable knowledge' (12). He argues for caution when ethnography contains emancipatory aims and contends that ethnography, when mixed with politics, could increase chances for researcher bias when following the experiences of a marginalised group. Interestingly, after noting that this would exclude feminist ethnography (along with a few other types) because it places other goals (gender equality presumably) 'alongside or above the production of knowledge' (12), he then backtracks from such axiological exclusions on the grounds that it would diminish the grounds for wide agreement on what ethnography 'is'.

We have focused on Hammersley's two articles here because of their field-defining influence in identifying 'what counts' as ethnographic endeavour, and because of their usefulness in

helping us clarify the main contours of PIE. As will perhaps be obvious from earlier comments, the main point we take issue with is the anthropocentric positioning of ethnography as a research endeavour which secures ontological and epistemological privilege for humans – like IE, it privileges human exceptionalism and discounts matter and materiality. A second factor follows from this: an anthropocentric ethnography privileges certain forms of knowledge and some knowers over others. Hammersley (2018) infers that ethnographers should pursue ‘instrumental’ (disinterested) knowledge which is more ‘reliable’ knowledge. This implicit bias towards the privileged logics of objectivity and ‘truth’ has long been critiqued by feminists (and post-colonial, anti-racist and Indigenous scholars) as a view from somewhere (white, masculinist, euro-american) which is masked by its positioning as ‘*the truth*’ (Haraway 1988) – which aligns with Smith’s feminist critique of sociological knowledge.

These considerations are both provocative and generative, and push us to ponder where is the place in ethnography for ‘political’ aims – such as those, for example, which expose gendered relations of ruling – or for ‘ethical’ considerations – such as those, for example, which are oriented to how humans may exist more responsibly in the world in relation with nonhumans and other-than-humans. As the theorisation advanced below indicates, a *refusal to separate* the ‘instrumental’ from the ontological and epistemological is precisely what PIE encourages us to focus on.

Towards a Posthumanist Institutional Ethnography

Posthumanism is a heterogeneous terrain of ideas, concepts, theories, frameworks and practices (Taylor 2016). While it is difficult to condense such a variegated field, what many of

these theories share is a desire to:

- Unsettle the category of the ‘human’ as the historical site of political privilege to include a broader range of ontologically diverse actors;
- Shift towards a multi-logical epistemology recognising Western reason is only one way of understanding the world and that other accounts, such as Indigenous accounts, or explanations using Non-Western Science, have equal value;
- Erase the humanly-instituted and well-policed boundaries between human/nature, natural/unnatural, human/nonhuman – and all the other boundaries that these primary binaries inaugurate;
- Shift away from an idea of ‘man’ as sole, sovereign and egoistic individual separated from others by ‘his’ bounded body and cultured mind and, instead, apprehend humans as beings in-relation, connected to their surroundings, nature and the world in more meaningful ways.

These desires articulate the political and ethical nature of the posthuman turn with its focus on relational entanglements, the dissolution of damaging binary dualisms, and an acceptance of the value of different ways of producing knowledge. Posthumanism is not about the end of humanity but is oriented to the development of theoretical and practical efforts to displace the legacy of Humanism with its anthropocentric imperative to position ‘species man’ (white, euro-american) as centre of the universe and top of a hierarchy in which ‘he’ is the only one who matters. From this, it elaborates an alternative to the systematic colonialist, patriarchal violences, oppressions and erasures that Humanism has historically instituted and which Western Enlightenment and the epistemological primacy of science have held fast to for so long.

Posthumanism gives matter and materiality due regard in knowledge-making practices.

Braidotti (2013) suggests that materialism not only offers a conceptual frame and a political stance but also a means to focus on ‘the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power’ (Dolphin and van der Tuin 2012, 21). These relations between matter, materiality, and arrangements of power are central to our development of PIE and the understandings it enables about how institutions inaugurate, concretise and reify gendering practices. Seen in this light, posthumanism is about providing some new ontological, epistemological and ethical starting points for considering gender in institutions, as we now explore. In the next section, the two projects are introduced. After that, the six key features of PIE are outlined and considered in relation to empirical data from our projects. This discussion analyses what PIE entails theoretically and empirically, and how it may produce novel insights into the institutional micropractices that help shape unequal gender relations.

Projects: methodology, methods and empirical materials

The first project, funded by the British Academy/ Leverhulme Trust in 2016–17, focused on the development of posthumanist methodologies to research how new educational spaces are claimed and made liveable. Qualitative data were generated through creative, visual, arts-based methodologies, and embodied, performative and participatory approaches. Data generation was emergent, contextual and situated, focusing on particular incidents, events and occurrences as staff engaged with the materialities, spaces, places and objects of the new building which housed the university’s newly-formed Institute of Education. The second project was a doctoral study which explored ECEC teachers and children’ relations with material and teaching spaces. Qualitative data were produced from a range of unstructured interviews, embodied, participatory observations of practice and spaces, and visual image

elicitation methods. Both projects obtained ethical approval from their respective University ethics committee and all data has been anonymised.

In both projects data were generated via a range of human-nonhuman emergent encounters, happenstance events and immanent incidents. While date, time and place were usually agreed with participants in advance, what constituted ‘data’ was not. Both projects activated processual, immanent and inventive research methodologies and practices which sought to ‘undo ... current ways of doing – and then *imagine, invent and do the doing differently*’ (Taylor 2016, 8) (italics in original). Data analysis took up MacLure’s (2013) encouragement for researchers to engage in posthumanist approaches to meaning-making which work outside dominant humanist patterns of coding and data analysis by theme. In line with this, the elaboration of PIE which follows focuses on a number of ‘material moments’, that is, ‘instances, occurrences and interactions which inhere in, and are enacted through, the materiality of bodily relations ... moments which are materially dense and specific ... time-bound and spatially-located’ (Taylor 2018a, 157). Such material moments come and go rapidly, they are often ‘felt’ and registered bodily rather than rationally apprehended, and their mundane-ness means they often pass unnoticed. Attending to material moments in PIE brings into focus those ‘small but consequential differences’ (Barad 2007, 29) through and in which the specifically *material* aspects of the material-discursive gendered politics of institutional arrangements are produced and sedimented. Material moments work as instances of what Barad (2007) calls an ‘agential cut’, an analytical boundary-making practice which selects and separates out ‘something’ – an object, event, practice – for analytic focus. Important to note, though, that agential cuts are double-edged: as the same time as marking off a boundary they also entangle us ontologically (as researchers making the cut) with/in and

as the phenomena produced by the cuts we make. This makes cuts, in posthuman terms, a profoundly ethical act.

Material moments 1: Matter in and out of place

Please Insert Photo 1 here

Please insert Photo 2 here

Please insert Photo 3 here

Photo 1 A handful of dirt

Photo 2 A cleaner's tools

Photo 3 Bin store

- Photo 1 shows a handful of dirt. I (Carol) spent a few mornings walking-with and working-with Jackie who was the cleaner on Floor 3 of the new building. Jackie had extracted the dirt from a vacuum cleaner which ceased to function when that dirt got caught in its inner mechanisms. The dirt is in her hand and she holds it out to me, 'look'. We both look at the dirt, sensing its feel, texture, weight and smell. An entangled moment: Jackie-hands-dirt-me-camera-photo-space-time-vacuum cleaner. And also a very particular mattering: Jackie can fix the vacuum cleaner herself but isn't 'allowed' to. Her grade precludes it. If equipment malfunctions, she tells me, she has to get a supervisor to fix it. Dirt's agency instantiates a gendered material politics.
- Photo 2 shows a cleaner's tools: items needed to do the job. They emerge from cupboards when cleaners arrive early in the morning, are visible while cleaners work, and are then tidied away before cleaners depart – around 8.15 a.m. The later inhabitants of the building – students, lecturers, administrators, managers – don't ever see these items, nor are they likely to notice the unnumbered and unmarked cupboards which house them.
- Photo 3 shows a corner of the bin store, where the daily rubbish is stored before being

collected mid-morning on each working day. The largely female cleaner workforce collect and take the rubbish to the bins. The bin collection and rubbish store emptying is done by men. The men arrive with a large and noisy bin lorry, which blocks the street outside while the emptying is done. The bin store is placed round the back of the building. Like the cleaners' cupboard is it unnumbered, unmarked and easy to miss. It is badly designed: the door doesn't open wide enough so the large bins have to be joggled through to make them fit, and the floor has a high lip so muscular strength is needed to wrestle a very heavy bin over that lip.

Material moments 2: Early Childhood Matters

Please Insert Photo 4 here

Please insert Photo 5 here

Please insert Photo 6 here

Photo 4 The rice tray

Photo 5 The heart mat

Photo 6 – The classroom

- Photos 4 and 6 show the classroom set up with traditional ECEC activities. Stella is at the rice tray (Photo 4) filling pots and humming softly. She moves between the rice tray, kitchen, and dressing up role play area (Photo 6) announcing she is making cakes for her friends. Home corner, dressing up, role play – these are all traditional feminised material pursuits of domesticity – and exemplify the ECEC classroom as a gendered space.
- Photo 5 is the heart mat/carpet which is a prominent feature in Reception classes in England. Children engage in 'carpet time' and this time generally includes aspects of teacher instruction. The mat took a prominent position in the classroom and children sat on the mat prior to engaging in other activities; the mat was the focus of

instruction. The vibrancy of the mat had a particular affinity for one child who liked to sit on the heart motif every time the mat was used.

- A section of the classroom had been set up as a hairdresser's salon with real resources such as towels, hairdryer, a piece of shower hose with an attaching shower head, hairbrushes and accessories. The teacher became the customer of the hairdressers and the children were the proprietors. Playing hairdressers enacts traditionally gendered feminine roles. While this is, perhaps, ironic in a private school which has high expectations for its female pupils, it nevertheless accords with dominant framings of the ECEC classroom as a gendered space which reflects the limited value of care work in wider society – care work which is still perceived as 'naturally' women's work and viewed as 'mothering' rather than work. The ECEC classroom becomes a material extension of the traditional view of the home: in the home corner girls cook and play with babies (photo 6).

The six features of Posthumanist Institutional Ethnography

We now identify the six distinct features of PIE. Threaded into this are discussions of the above material moments which illuminate these features in relation to how gendering practices matter in the everyday life of institutional work.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: Six features of PIE

1. PIE focuses on the material-discursive

PIE's decentering of the 'human' shifts attention to a host of other materialities, elements, spaces, things and objects in any institutional scenario. In posthumanist thinking, matter has vital agency. Matter's vitality – its thing-power – is explored by Bennett (2010). She speaks of 'the capacity of things – not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi-agents of forces with trajectories, properties and tendencies of their own' (Bennett, 2010, viii). This conceptualisation refutes notions of passive 'brute materiality' (Ingold 2010, 8) and sees matter as vibrant 'lively materiality that is self-transformative and ... saturated with ... agentic capacities' (Coole 2010, 92). Thinking matter's vitality has consequences: it situates agency not as a possession of human will or intention but as a material-discursive capacity differentially distributed and enacted through human/nonhuman co-relational activity; the distributed nature of agency means that what comes to exist does so through intra-active, confederate material processes of emergence (rather than through the actions of pre-existent separate entities) (Taylor 2016); and matters' agency requires a material-discursive analysis which works across nature/culture, natural/unnatural, and human/material binaries. How might a material-discursive analysis take account of gender in everyday institutional life?

The institutional labour of cleaning has long been recognised as a gendered occupation linked both to wider inequalities in the workforce (Duffy 2007) and to class and race (Bosmans et al. 2016). Cleaning is a stigmatised occupation, seen both as 'dirty work' and work that only certain women would do. As noted earlier, it is difficult to find any higher education studies that include analysis of cleaners' institutional contributions. PIE addresses this neglect and, in encouraging a close focus on the question: what does dirt do? makes visible how dirt as 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966) functions through material-discursive practices to order

institutional thinking about (gendered) bodies. In thinking-with-dirt, PIE offers analytical resources for noticing how dirt, as *matter*, ‘sticks’ to some bodies (cleaners’ bodies) in ways which promote and justify *discursive* regimes of lower pay and poorer conditions. Dirt, as matter out of place, functions as an active nonhuman agency within entangled material-discursive forces to maintain unequal patterns of gendering within our everyday lives within HE institutions.

But, paradoxically, dirt in institutional like is also matter *in* place. Dirt does more than separate those ‘clean’, visible and ‘correct’ bodies of academics and students from the bodies of those others (largely women) who do ‘dirty work.’ Dirt’s material-discursive productivity speaks into the continuing social power of accounts of women’s bodies as sites of unruliness and lack of discipline, in which ‘natural’ functions of biology and reproduction, menstruation, lactation and childbirth (Douglas 1966; Shildrick 1997) position women as in need of regulation and control. Women’s bodies, as ‘dirty bodies’, continue to be subject to unequal control and regulation in universities. It is no accident that there are, for example, a tiny number of women vice-chancellors, a disproportionately low number of women professors, a shamefully low numbers of black female professors. Legislative – discursive – efforts at equality and diversity operate alongside ‘hidden’ material practices of institutional sexism, racism and ableism whose enduring effects are hard to dislodge. Such efforts are undermined (however ‘unconsciously’) by long-standing cultural notions of women’s bodies as ‘dirty’, leaky, natural bodies, as bodies whose viscous porosity is potentially dangerous and which/who must, therefore, be fixed firmly as ‘matter *in* place’.

In ECEC, the reproduction of binary gendered norms in primary schools and the ways in which girls are subject to dominant discourses of how femininity should be embodied in

classrooms is well-researched (Reay 2001; Renold and Allan 2006). This happens despite evidence that gender is contradictory, shifting and fluid (Yelland 1998) and children often enact different gendered roles (Davies 2002). The highly feminised nature of the workforce links with discursive constructions of what is ‘natural’ and of care as a component of mothering (Ailwood 2008). These considerations produce ECEC classroom as a mirror of traditional home and domestic roles (Fairchild 2017). Photo 4 of a rice tray and Stella, in the ‘home corner’ play kitchen of the classroom, announces that she is ‘baking cakes’ for her friends. In this, both Stella (as gendered body) and matter (rice tray, cooker) are *in place* in playing out traditional homemaking roles. However, as she plays the rice tray entrances her, she slowly caresses the top of the tray and hums as uses the scoops to empty and fill the containers with rice. The nonhuman capacities of the tray, rice, scoops and containers connect agentially with the girl’s human body momentarily producing Stella as matter *out of place* – as rice-tray human-nonhuman hybrid or, to use Haraway’s (1985) metaphor, as cyborg. Scoops, as ‘plastic flesh’ (Tuana 2008, 198) become extensions of Stella’s arms in a material dance of agency. When bodies touch electrons are shared and molecular interactions occur. Stella as hybrid human-cyborg exemplifies how ‘once the molecular interaction occurs, there is no divide between nature/culture’ (Tuana, 2008, 202). Matter’s viscous porosity momentarily produces new articulations of gender at the same time as making traditional gendered societal roles ‘available’.

The material-discursive aspect of PIE prompts a consideration of matter’s agentic capacities and urges us to pay greater attention to what happens – how gender gets done – in human-nonhuman engagements. Two broader point follow. First, the need to rethink ontology beyond the confines of human subjectivity to recognise that agency is distributed within, between, and through relational connections of human-nonhuman matterings. The

connections produced by this flatter ontology are non-linear and non-hierarchical and enable a shift from ‘an epistemology of human consciousness to a relational ontology’ (Lather 2016, 125). Second, pursuing a close-up, micro-level focus on material-discursive practices opens the way to important insights about differential patterns of institutional mattering at meso- and macro-levels, and help concretise new feminist challenges to the hegemony of nature/culture binaries regarding embodiment (Butler 1993, 2004; Grosz 1994) in institutional practices.

2. PIE envisages institutions as assemblages

The second feature of PIE is that it operates with a concept of assemblages which are collections of heterogeneous bodies – human and nonhuman, social, material, abstract and physical – which emerge and come into relations around particular events. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) characterise assemblages as temporary, emergent and conditional unities of bodies which connect and interact in specific forms of content and expression, continually in flux. For Bennett (2010), assemblages are agentic federations of actants and agency is distributed across the assemblage with agentic potential expressed by the vitality of the materialities that constitutes it. In assemblage theory DeLanda (2006, 5) notes that the assemblage is a ‘whole whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts’. PIE’s focus on assemblage offers an analytical means to consider the entities that compose assemblages and how assemblages scale up through local-global inter-relations in wider communities, government bodies, cities and networked organizations. The concept of assemblage is key to PIE’s exploration of institutions as shifting, temporary and unstable sites of human-nonhuman gendered viscous matterings.

University cleaning constitutes an often hidden economic-political and institutional assemblage, with spatial and temporal dimensions. Cleaners arrive very early in the morning and leave before most academics and students arrive, or they arrive in the evening after academics and students have gone home. Cleaners' are usually female, low paid, and from lower socioeconomic positions in society but also men who are similarly socially positioned. As already indicated, in the material time-space of the university assemblage, cleaners' bodies and working practices are relationally positioned as 'matter out of place' vis-à-vis the normative and hierarchically-disposed teaching, learning and research space and time that is seen as the 'main and proper' business of the university. The assemblage of cleaning practices, processes and matterings are, also, in continual mutation in relation with: material cleaning items (see photo 2), organisational hierarchies of teams, roles and functions, health and safety directives, and human resource employment practices. Thus, the institutional cleaning assemblage differs daily in its particularities *and* endures as a material-discursive articulation of the mundane mattering of dirt. The cleaning assemblage, with its temporal and spatial rhythms and habits, inaugurates and organises everyday institutional life; its disposition of materialities and bodies is at one and the same time a disposition of power in producing the gendered inequalities regarding what and who matters on campus.

Dirt's agency in the cleaning assemblage operates at a larger scale in linking socio-economic conditions, political matterings, and (some) bodies as 'matter out of place' through the widespread university practice of outsourcing. Recent industrial action at a number of universities highlight the fact that, in comparison with in-house colleagues, outsourced staff receive poorer pensions, holiday pay, sick pay, maternity pay and paternity pay entitlements (IGWB 2018). Focusing on dirt, at this wider scale, helps draw attention to universities' culpability in embedding neglectful, highly gendered (and raced and classed) injustices, in

their material-discursive institutional arrangements.

ECEC classrooms likewise work as assemblages (Fairchild 2017) in which constellations of viscous matterings continually emerge, solidify momentarily, then change as connections are dropped, made and remade. The hairdresser's salon, for example, becomes an agentic connection point where children, teachers and materials enact gendering practices which tame unruly bodies. These institutional matterings scale-up in pervasive ways to produce ECEC as a gendered political-economic assemblage for career choice and work chances. Young women undertaking ECEC vocational training, for example, recognise that their career lacks value in the 'hair or care' sector (Vincent and Braun 2010). Perceptions of deficit likewise 'stick' to the predominantly female ECEC teachers who are seen as performing a role akin to mothering (Ailwood 2008). Such gendered deficits are maintained by policy calls to increase the number of male ECEC teachers, calls which do nothing to destabilise traditional 'natural' gender assumptions and the efficacy of which are not supported by research (Carrington and Skelton 2003; Fairchild 2019b).

In envisaging institutional arrangements as assemblages, PIE offers an analytical advantage in exploring the temporary and emergent and yet enduring and habitual nature of institutional practices, as well as how they work at different scales, spatially and temporally. Such insights can be helpful in contesting 'developmentalist' narratives of institutional progress and in considering institutional change, particularly in relation to gender, as always emerging from multiple material shiftings and contestations.

3. PIE hones in on events

The ‘material moments’ (Taylor 2013, 2018) in this article are characterised as events that generate material-discursive resonances and intensities. Events are without a fixed structure, temporality or property and are never pre-determined (Deleuze 1994). Rather, events are emergent and potentially transformative processes-in-becoming. PIE’s focus on events offers insights into the material constitutiveness of institutional possibilities, keeps open the future of institutional potentialities, and supports feminist attempts to think differently about what matters. Methodologically, a focus on events requires a close-up attention to the entangled relations and concrete specificities of material enactments. As discussed throughout this paper, gendering is considered as enactment which gets ‘done’ via material practices entailing micro-, meso- and macro-levels but that all of the many small ‘differences that matter’ (Barad 2007) are crucial in enabling those ‘larger’ institutional matterings to be immanently located and shaped. Theoretically, PIE’s focus on micro/material moments supports ongoing feminist attempts to counter the denigration of the micro which has been, and continues to be, prevalent in mainstream-malestream sociological thinking. Such a focus shifts attention from ‘macro’ homogeneous structures to the immanence of inequalities and their material appearance in institutional practices, spatio-material arrangements, and human-nonhuman relations. PIE’s focus on events aims to reveal agentic acts which possess the potential to disrupt patterns of gender hegemony through their novel assemblage of connections and relations. Such material moments, however fleeting they may be, open new possibilities for doing gender differently and shift the scale of analytic value.

4. PIE attends to the affective life of institutions

Massumi (2002) conceptualises affect, following Spinoza, as capacities, potentialities and possibilities that traverse bodies of all kinds. Affect differs from emotion which, at the risk of

making an overly crude distinction, are usually considered a psychological property of an individually-bounded body (Von Scheve and Slaby 2019). Affect focuses on what a body can do and, through considerations of the intersubjective, transpersonal states of bodily being, affect opens an important way of thinking about institutional life. Affects circulate, flow across and infuse bodies of all kinds, rendering individuality redundant. PIE encourages attention to those affective forces which, however ephemeral, profoundly influence our everyday institutional lives. The affective tones of neoliberalism in education might be documented in bodily sensations of drag, frustration and a felt but ungraspable sense of dissonance between self and surroundings. It might be the momentary glow that a taught session went well, that students ‘got it’, of shared laughter that suddenly takes off in the room. Honing in on the post-personal, posthuman dimension of affects helps develop insights into the minutiae of unfolding bodily transformations and changes in bodily capacity (Massumi 2002).

Attending to the affective power of dirt encourages further interrogation of how dirt’s sticky relationality releases power as damaging affect which traverses bodies in the relational and lived labour of everyday academic life. While Feature 1 indicated dirt’s material-discursive power in attaching itself to cleaners’ bodies, and Feature 2 dirt’s agency in micro-macro educational-economic assemblages, what isn’t captured there is dirt’s affective power. Jackie told me (Carol) of a repeated morning experience of being ignored when saying hello to an academic: ‘he just didn’t see me, it’s as if I was too far below him for him to hear me.’ The term ‘emotional labour’ is inadequate in capturing Jackie’s visceral sense of being ignored, disregarded, unnoticed. Jackie’s body continues to carry this affective hurt, a hurt which comes and goes, which occasionally infuses the atmosphere, which gets entangled with the institutional spaces, tools and objects of her work, and which is sometimes relayed to those

whom she feels she can tell this story to.

The mat in the ECEC classroom helps rethink the affective flows of care. The mat's viscous porosity affectively regulates and controls girls' bodies: the mat is a pivot for instruction, a space to sit and listen, a means to materialise the 'good', normalised, girlhood child. The affective power of the heart motif on the mat invokes a physical response in the girl and her teacher which disturbs the material regulatory power of the mat. That this girl sits on the heart during every mat-based activity, despite the teacher's efforts to dissuade her, points to the mat's affectivity – the mat becomes a 'matter of care' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2018) which disrupts human-centric notions of care and caring work. In this material-discursive event mats care, provoking a momentary re-conceptualisation of caring as a more-than-human concern. The mat affectively decentres gendered notions of maternalism and caring.

The broader point is that PIE helps disclose how being affected is a relational, human-nonhuman affair, and that this opens a way into an affective politics considered as a mode of concern. Shavero (2008, 1) elaborates: 'concern implies a weight upon the spirit. When something concerns me, I cannot ignore it or walk away from it. It presses upon my being, and compels me to respond.' Concern as a connective force – in its relational viscosity – which ties humans, nonhumans, objects and things together in deeply moving, felt, and often pre-conscious ways might, we suggest, be mobilized in education as a means to shape better institutional ways of living, interacting and working. Encourage the girl to sit on the heart; say hello to all those we encounter. Such micro-occurrences, in centering affective politics, may (just may) have the potential to contribute to the accretive power of collective transformation.

5. PIE views knowledge as a material practice

The fifth feature of PIE considers knowledge as a material practice, thereby disrupting humanist anthropocentric presumptions of self/world separation. According to Barad (2007, 49), 'knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from *a direct material engagement with the world*' (italics in original). Knowledge as material practice emphasises what Haraway (1988) called situated knowledge, where situatedness is not merely about physical location but is '(con)figured as specific connectivity' (Barad 2016, 326). Knowledge as a materially-situated practice is about witnessing, seeing and attesting as both a 'view from somewhere' (Barad 2016, 326) and an onto-epistemological matter of accountability to those with whom we are entangled (Barad 2007). Theoretical concepts are, furthermore, embodied: all theory is material. This move shifts epistemology from knowledge 'of' or 'about' to knowing-with or alongside; knowing is an embodied mode of viscous mattering which prompts us to pay attention to 'respectful engagements with different [material] practices' (Barad 2007, 39).

Enacting knowledge-ing as viscous mattering means we as researchers are entangled with the patterns of difference, the affective attunements, of our data, methods and findings (Barad 2007). Knowledge as viscous matterings enacts relational connections produced in research practices, erasing traditional research boundaries between 'researcher' and 'researched' and rendering 'us' responsible for the cuts – the cutting together and apart – produced in the research process (Barad 2007). Thinking knowledge's situated materialities enables PIE to build on the feminist epistemological allegiances of the researcher as suggested by Smith (1974). It adds a response-ability to account for all the bodies that emerge in the analysis of material-discursive practices of mattering, thus extending the shift from knowledge in humanist vein as 'at a distance' and deepening a feminist conception of knowledge as

materially relational.

6. PIE promotes affirmative ethics

PIE's sixth feature is that it offers an affirmative, relational and inclusive view of ethics.

Braidotti (2006, 140) explains that posthuman affirmative ethics is 'based on the shared capacity of humans to feel empathy for, develop affinity with and hence enter in relation with other forces, entities, beings, waves of intensity'. This connected posthuman view of ethics as an engagement with the potentia of life promotes interconnection across species and nonhuman agencies working against anthropocentric self-centred individualism. The affirmative ethics of PIE shifts decisively out of the humanist cul-de-sac which casts ethics in Kantian mode as abstract, universalising and human rights-based discourses which emanate from the supposedly rational and moral properties of individual human bodies. But as Black, decolonial, feminist and posthuman scholars know, universal ethics were never that: they were (and continue to be) largely in service to White, male, colonialist exclusionary practices (Taylor 2018b).

PIE re-orientes ethics away from presumptions of individuality and generality to a recognition of our already entangled onto-epistemological status. Barad (2007, 392– 393) states that 'we (but not only 'we humans') are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but thorough the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails' and that 'each intra-action matters' (Barad 2007, 185). The affirmative ethics at the heart of PIE is, then, a call for better ways to promote human-nonhuman flourishing as a vital matter of living well in the minutiae of the entangled presents we share. From the university cleaner who wishes for recognition of her existence, to the

plastic water bottles left behind at the end of seminars, to the little girl sitting on the heart mat who turned to the ECEC teacher and said, ‘I love you!’ to which the teacher replied, ‘I like you too!’, to the daily food waste of corporate catering, to the heat which escapes inefficient institutional buildings, to the atmospheres poisoned by neoliberalism and its performatives, to the homeless person sleeping in the university building doorway, affirmative ethics points to the potentiality of (the necessity of) care, concern and even love as a mode of viscous mattering.

More broadly, affirmative ethics, in refusing the refusals of professional/personal boundaries and in working against those heart-breaking moments when the damages done by lack of reciprocity is tangibly, materially and affectively felt, might be a way to reinvigorate more material, ecological and sustainable modes of social justice at the heart of educational institutions. The necessity of attending to the human/nonhuman viscous porosity of gendering practices is, as we have indicated throughout this article, central to PIE’s affirmative ethics.

Conclusion

PIE generates powerful insights into the material-discursive micro-practices of gendering processes in institutions. It formulates new ways of considering how inequalities are produced through and as material-discursive practices and how gender materialises and is regulated within institutions. PIE’s six features articulate its theoretical, methodological and empirical value, and the examples from two projects indicate how PIE may be put to work in research practice. The article indicates how PIE advances existing feminist scholarship on IE and builds on Dorothy Smith’s legacy. PIE’s theoretical and methodological value lies in exposing how an attention to material moments – that is, those ephemeral, affective and

happenstance yet profoundly event-ful occurrences in the daily time-space rhythms of institutional life – both brings into view material aspects of institutional life which often elude attention and discloses how micro instances are entangled with macro forces. PIE extends long-standing feminist contestations of malestream knowledge-making practices by making the case for attention to the material, affective and relational dimensions of institutional gendered exclusions and injustice. Finally, PIE harnesses the ethico-onto-epistemological value of posthumanist and new material feminist theorising to broaden the ethnographic imaginary by including humans and nonhumans in educational inquiry.

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